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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the establishment of a professional growth and evaluation system in Connecticut's New Canaan Public Schools. The effort included various significant opportunities for teachers to assess themselves and guide their own professional thinking and action. These opportunities resulted in richer feedback to teachers about their performance and a meaningful linkage between evaluations, professional development, and student work. The effort included well-defined opportunities for self-assessment and reflection; elements of the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching; differentiated supervision and professional development options for tenured teachers; and relevant, meaningful linkage between professional growth, evaluation, and improvement of student work. One of the major acts of commitment to this program for staff and supervisors was to establish a goal setting procedure focused on student learning. Goals had to be substantive, target increased student performance, reflect a clear link to district and school goals, and be specific and measurable. Teachers received training in how to develop and write goals based on student work to enhance instructional effectiveness. Overall, the process enriched the dialogue between teachers, district curriculum coordinators, and supervisors, heightened awareness of accomplishments, and contributed to a more meaningful and comprehensive summative evaluation. Self-reflection was essential to teacher-supervisor dialogue in formulating tentative goals. (SM)

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Improving Student Work Linked with Professional Growth: What Synergism!

Russ Firlik

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Russ First

Improving Student Work Linked with Professional Growth: What Synergism!

Our ever-searching need to change, repackage, reform, and restructure pubic education is very much like Einstein's notion of insanity in that we continue to do the same things over and over again expecting different results each time. Like most Americans, reformers believe that education is a solution for both individual failures and larger societal problems. School reformist in the last decade has drawn largely from corporate, academic, and government elites, with the endorsement by parents, concentrated on solving the nation's economic problems through educational restructuring or reform.

Hopefully, as we emerge more firmly into the 21st Century, we may have perhaps evolved full circle, and are now back to educators looking at children's work as a strategy to improve students' school performance. It seems that Michael Fullan (1999) was smack on target when he suggested that rationally constructed reform strategies do not work. The simple reason is that such strategies can never work in the face of rapidly changing environments. In other words, the old ways of managing change, appropriate perhaps in stable times, does not work anymore. This area of examination meets the criterion of "things that are changing," requires a constant variable. Perhaps, along with looking carefully at children's work, we need to build a professional incentive into the school culture to establish a capacity for educators to look at children's work as they carry on with their specialized craft.

The Annenberg's Institute, with their established set of accountability and collaborative partnering, has provided numerous examples of such positive examination of the importance of focusing on student work as a barometer of school effectiveness.

Furthermore, The Essential School pedagogues, who focus on active, inquiry-based learning, describe fundamental change in the quality of student's scholarship, motivation, and attitude. However, there has been little effective research and systematic action plans to support an orderly move to directly connect the students' work, as a focus, to professional educators' growth and evaluation.

With the establishment of a professional growth and evaluation system, the New Canaan Public Schools embarked upon a new era in teacher's professional growth and evaluation development. This new re-birth included a variety of significant opportunities for teachers to assess themselves and guide their own professional thinking and action. The opportunities afforded within this new program promoted colleagues and administrators richer feedback to teachers about their performance and a meaningful linkage between evaluations, professional development, and student work.

Our plan was built upon the guidelines provided by the Committee on Professional Evaluation, the charge of the Superintendent of Schools, the Director of Human Resources, state guidelines, and current research. The committee sought to develop a plan that included:

- Well-defined opportunities for self-assessment and reflection
- Elements of the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching
- Differentiated supervision and professional development options for tenured teachers
- Relevant and meaningful linkage between professional growth, evaluation, and how to improve students' work.

Goal Setting and Focus of Students' Work

One of the major acts of commitment to this program for the professional staff and supervisors was to establish a goal setting procedure. It was deemed critical that the goal setting process was an essential component in focusing on student performance. By defining the outcomes for student learning, goals provided focus for the work of the teachers. These carefully thought out and written goals would become the focus for both tenured and non-tenured teachers for their evaluative observations, professional development program, reflective self-assessments, and formal written reports. The process of goal setting to establish the focus of improving students' work began with honest reflections and authentic assessments about current practices, current student performances and a desire to improve students' work. Therefore, the primary aim in goal setting was student learning. The essential question a teacher asked when setting goals was "what student learning outcomes am I hoping to achieve?" A linkage question to professional growth was "What do I need to do or know in order to accomplish the student learning outcomes?" The third question to connect everything together was "How can I, the reflective practitioner, receive important supportive feedback from my supervisor through observations and collaborative conversations and discussions?" Teachers had a focus on student work and learning, professional experiences to enhance goal accomplishment, and administrative support and encouragement to make continuous progress in their craft of teaching and learning. Thus this process lead to the formation of annual goals, strategies for achieving those goals (including relevant professional development activities), and methods of assessing progress toward goal attainment.

What Constitutes a How to Improve Student Work Goal?

Goals had to be substantive, target increased student performance and reflect a clear link to district and school goals. They needed to be specific and measurable, i.e., goals should have tangible and or verifiable results that provided the necessary feedback for continued growth. In the spring teachers will engage in self-assessment/reflection using specially designed teacher made forms. This process declared that each teacher was to propose two goals for the year that targeted enhanced student learning:

- Through careful assessment of student work, and
- Supported district and school goals

These goals should lead to the strengthening and broadening of their own skills and talents as well. Goals may also provide an opportunity for educators to explore, develop, and test innovative methodologies and ideas, e.g., brain growth and its application in the classroom.

All teachers were provided training workshops on how to establish, set, and write goals based upon student work to enhance instructional effectiveness. Teachers discussed their goals with their supervisors as part of the continuous evaluation meetings. At these meetings the goals were discussed, modified, negotiated, reworked, sometimes co-constructed with supervisor, and finally approved.

In the fall the goals could be further refined in the context of any subsequent developments such as refinement related to summer training, revised district goals, changes in class composition or assignment, etc. This was indeed an exciting growth experience for many of the teachers and supervisors.

Improving Student Work through Professional Growth and Evaluation

As part of the annual evaluation process, teachers completed the following measurement activities:

- Progress toward attainment of instructional/professional development goals
- Performance evidence impact as a result of focusing on student work/learning
- Effectiveness of goal strategies: Key success factors
- Adjustments based on periodic assessments and observations by supervisors/colleagues
- Analysis of results/outcomes
- Remaining challenges
- Other professional achievements
- Further instructional and professional development goals for next year

Conclusions

The analysis and information gleaned through this process enriched the dialogue between teachers, district curriculum coordinators, supervisors, heightened awareness of accomplishments, and contributed to a more meaningful and comprehensive summative evaluation. Of equal importance, the self-reflection was essential to the teacher/supervisor dialogue in formulating tentative goals for the following year. Built into this extremely student-oriented, teacher friendly, systematic plan were professional growth options for tenured teachers. For example, training in Peer Coaching, Individual

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and Collaborative Action Research Projects, and the National Teacher Certification journey.

Generally, a measurable growth-actualizing year was evidenced. The examination of student work contributed to the following:

- Establishing a common understanding of what high-standard student work and effective teaching practices look like
- Helping in developing more authentic forms of assessment that are relevant, closely embedded in practice, and that measure skills, dispositions, multiple intelligence, and knowledge, while respecting and encouraging creativity and innovation
- Providing an opportunity for exchange and dialogue with those outside the classroom

What this pilot year did not inform us about and will be used for next year's refinements were:

1. How does student work meet rubrics and standards?
2. What kinds of instruction will support students to be able to evaluate and interpret their own work against the standards or rubric?
3. What strategies can we develop in order to support student capacity for self-reflection of their work?
4. What are the implications for instruction based on what we have experienced throughout the system this year?
5. How do many different ways can we assess the quality of our teaching and learning practices?
6. How can we use multiple intelligence theory linked to practice options more effectively for students and teachers?

In summary, the focusing on and the careful examination of engaging student work was a delightful experience. This, coupled with the concomitant emphasis on promoting and enhancing professional growth options, were found to be an effective source for our designing more relevant instruction and meaningful methodologies. We believe that we all can deepen our understanding of student-centered instructional practices, authentic assessments, knowledge, and social competencies that are required to enhance and enrich active student learning.

(Insert Chart Here)

References

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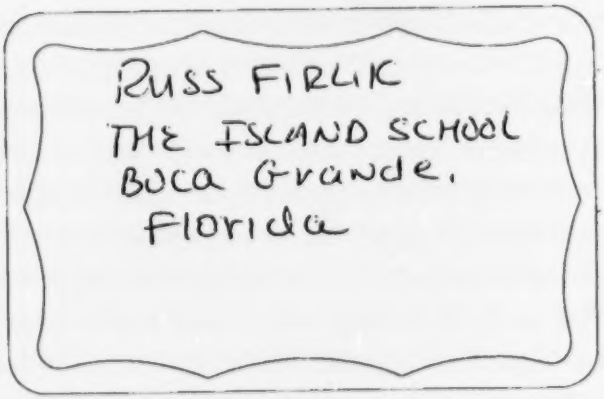

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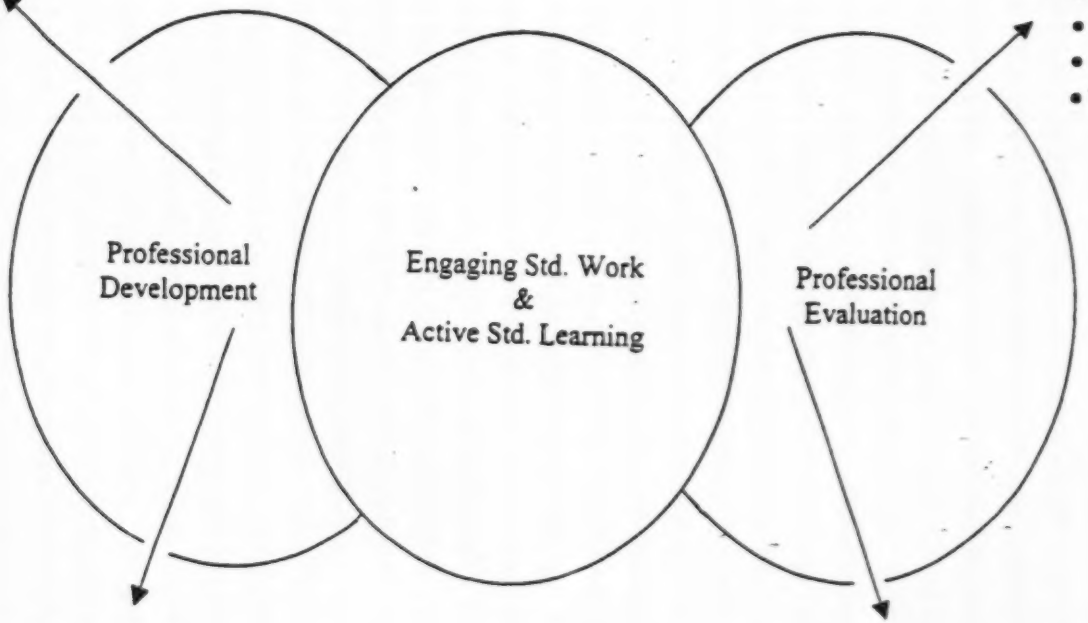
Student Learning + Professional Development Goals
=’s
Engaging Student Work + Active Student Learning

Goal Setting:

- Workshops
- Visitations
- Course Work
- Collaboration
- Seminars

Self-Reflection/Assessments:

- Continuous Progress
- Dialogue Focused
- Adult Developmentally Based
- Accomplishments Validated



Growth Options:

- Individual Projects
- Action-Research
- Collaboration Projects
- Peer Coaching
- National Teacher Certification

Educator’s Choice:

- Classroom Observations
- Supportive Assistance
- Observations linked to Student Work and Learning

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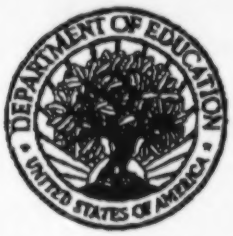

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